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Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

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COUN 6785: Social Change in Action: Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

Danica Yates

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: Unemployment, Purpose, Native Americans, Blackfeet, Youth, Horses, Browning Montana, Glacier County

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

Goal Statement: The goal for my social change portfolio is to work through a local organization that trains wild horses to provide a job and purpose for some youth in the Blackfoot community as a prevention strategy against falling into unemployment and poverty in their adult lives.

Significant Findings: Glacier County ranks lowest of any county in Montana in combined health outcomes (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). The poverty rate there in the Blackfoot Nation is close to 50% (Montana State University, 2017). Unemployment rates are much higher than reported due to the fact that only individuals actively seeking work are recorded (G. Klauk, personal communication, March 20, 2021). Youth are at high risk for continuing the cycle of dropping out of high school and not working. By partnering a local non-profit that adopts horses with youth who strongly uphold the cultural norm and tradition of working with horses, jobs and purpose could be created in the local economy for some youth. Elicitation research, or a needs assessment, would need to be undertaken to determine if this program would be useful, desired, and received in the community.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: Action items include discussing and planning with the board members of Freedom Horse Farm, scheduling meetings or focus groups with the Browning school, alternative school, and community college, working with interested community members to set up a facility for the work, organizing and securing horses and initial funding for the program.

INTRODUCTION

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

As I was driving through the reservation town of Browning, Montana with a local, I asked, “what do people here do for work?” I enjoy traveling to non-tourist destinations, domestically and abroad to experience an authentic glimpse of other cultures. Often a question that comes up for me as I see new places is, “what are the local economy and job markets; what is the purpose of people living here?” As I looked out the passenger window at the little town buried in a gully, isolated in barren rangeland on the bitterly cold, windy, east slope of the continental divide, I wondered about this question more than ever. My friend answered, “Not much. Most people here are unemployed.” This struck me to the core, that a community of people is sheltered here in low-income housing in the middle of nowhere, for no reason. Yet, the reason is historic and contemporary oppression and marginalization of Native American people. The US government drove them here, forced them to stay, and now continues to ignore and undermine them. This community filled with people ‘not doing much,’ sheltering together with no purpose, is the result of systemic racism.

The overall health outcomes for the state of Montana rank in the top half of US states in all categories except one outlier point which sits significantly lower than the national average. This weakest point in the health of Montanans is the 41% of American Indian children who live in poverty (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). My topic for social change is the prevention of the next generation of native children living out their lives unemployed in poverty.

My objective is to provide opportunity for youth on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation to end the cycle of unemployment and gain a sense of purpose by training wild horses.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

The target population I have identified within my community is unemployment and lack of purpose among Native Americans on the Blackfoot Reservation. Unemployment in my county, Flathead, is among the lowest in the state, and Montana lies between the top 50% to the top 10% in the nation for all health outcomes and factors (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). However, the next county over from mine, Glacier, is ranked 47th in health outcomes and 48th in health factors out of the 48 counties in the state (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2018). The health factor that I am going to focus on in Glacier county is the socioeconomic issue of lack of employment and purpose.

Unemployment and poverty statistics on the Blackfoot Reservation vary depending on the source. The Montana Department of Labor and Industry reports an unemployment rate of 11.4% in Glacier County (Montana.gov, 2020). A report by Montana State University (2017) showed the poverty rate on the reservation rising from 2012 to 2015 from 36% to 38.6% and the unemployment rate dropping from 20.6% to 18.7%. Thus, the reported decrease in the unemployment rate from 2015 to 2020 was 7.3%. The Blackfoot Nation, however, reports the statistic to be nearly 50% for the poverty rate (Montana State University, 2017). According to a teacher in the reservation high school, because unemployment statistics only account for the

people who are actively seeking work, the unemployment numbers are not dropping because people are finding work, they are dropping because people have given up on looking for work.

The consequences of this problem in my region are far-reaching, including physical health consequences, mental health consequences, social/educational/family consequences, and economic consequences. As motivational levels drop in seeking employment and career development, so might motivation to exercise, seek knowledge, gain new skills, build strong relationships. As income drops, the ability to buy healthy food and live in safe housing decreases, and physical health declines.

The goal for my social change portfolio is to work through a local organization that trains wild horses to provide a job and purpose for some youth in the Blackfoot community as a prevention strategy against falling into unemployment and poverty in their adult lives. Horses are an integral part of Blackfoot culture, historically and contemporarily. It is common in the community for youth to grow up riding bareback on the prairie and be immersed in horse culture, where the animals are considered family members (G. Klauk, personal communication, March 20, 2021). The horse training jobs for native youth program embraces the Blackfoot norm of connecting with horses and provides the opportunity to gain employment and purpose through applying their skills in horse riding. Similar to a program in Uganda that helps provide opportunity for youth, “I want them to have the ability to give back and to be change agents for their communities” (Laureate International Universities, n.d.). By providing some youth with the opportunity to develop a marketable trade, it would set an example for peers and other members of the community of the possibility of new, fulfilling employment on the reservation.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

According to Swearer & Hymel (2015), the social-ecological theory describes human development as an interplay between people and the many systems in which they operate including home, neighborhood, school, community, and society. I will look at the most prevalent risk and protective factors for youth gaining employment on the Blackfoot Reservation, including the societal risk factor noted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Risk Factors at Family, Community and Cultural Levels

Family is likely a great risk factor for youth becoming unemployed. If youth in Browning grow up witnessing neither of their parents getting up and going to work in the morning, this is the model that they know and are likely to follow. If the norm in the community around them is to live off government subsidies, in government housing, where friends and family are not only unemployed but are not looking for work and perhaps have never worked, this would be a great risk factor for youth following in those footsteps.

At the community level, risk factors for unemployment include geographical isolation in a small town with very few jobs or connections to outside industries. The population of the town of Browning in 2019 was 1,014 (CityData.com, 2019). The closest town to Browning is Cut Bank, Montana 35 miles away. The low wages in the community may be a risk factor because even when working, the pay available is meager. While the median household income in the US is \$57,652, in Browning it is \$22,596 (Neighborhood Scout, 2021). 43% of residents rent homes and the value of the housing market is rated “Very Low” compared to the nation, and “Very

Low” compared to the rest of Montana (Neighborhood Scout, 2021). The risk factor for successful career development is high in a community that is entrenched in poverty and lacks many avenues out.

At the cultural level, risk factors for unemployment include discrimination in the workplace and racism against Native Americans in society at large. The Blackfoot culture is very isolated from other cultures in Montana. 95.3% of the population in the town of Browning is Native American (CityData.com, 2019). Natives who grew up in Browning may feel alienated from their culture if they move into the urban area of the Flathead Valley looking for work, where 95% of the population is white (US Census Burro, 2019). Youth in Browning state that they feel they are living in two worlds; their community is fighting to not be assimilated but also not isolated, “lots of youth just don’t care and want to move on” (G. Klauk, personal communication, March 20, 2021). As a resident of the very conservative, religious Flathead Valley, I rarely see Native American individuals despite the county being bordered by two reservations.

Protective Factors at the Individual, School, and Family Levels

The schools in Browning offer perhaps one of the greatest protective factors against youth falling into unemployment and poverty. At the individual level, protective factors of resiliency, self-confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy can be developed and strengthened in the school environment. Teachers provide the support and resources to help youth find passions, strengths, interests, and marketable skills. The motto of the school is, “Inspire, Achieve, Graduate” (Browning Public Schools, 2021). Further, the school district has an alternative school, Buffalo Hide Academy, which has five teachers and two counselors serving 120 students a year. This trauma-engaged institution works with many at-risk students and takes great pride

in, “creating and maintaining an empathetic, safe space for all students and their families. The emotional and physical wellness of our environment are of equal importance to our academic initiative” (Buffalo Hide, 2020).

While families can be a risk factor for unemployment, they can also be a potential protective factor. On the Blackfoot Reservation, households are large and extended families generally live in close proximity. If a particular family is supportive of a member’s efforts to find employment, the individual might gain great moral support in their endeavors.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

Health programs are most effective when a practitioner has a thorough understanding of the target population and environment in which the behavior occurs (National Cancer Institute, 2005). Looking at Blackfoot culture through the ecological perspective of the Health Belief Model sheds light on the unique cost and benefit for locals to change unemployment status.

Theories

A theory that I can apply to the program to help native youth in Browning gain employment and purpose, is the Health Belief Model viewed through the ecological perspective. The physical and sociocultural environments play an enormous role in how and why youth in Browning often lack gainful employment. A 1988 study by McLeroy et.al describes five levels of influence that interventions must target (National Cancer Institute, 2005). The lives and behavior of Native Americans living in Browning hinge on the most distant level of influence,

social and economic policy. In addition to individual's perceptions of the problem, powers of the higher levels of the socio-ecological system limit solutions.

The cycle of poverty and unemployment on the reservation being the lowest in the state is a direct result of policy. The community of Browning was established due to the 1851 Indian Appropriations Act, which Congress passed to create the Indian Reservation System. Natives were driven off their land and forced into the makeshift town of Browning. Indians were not allowed to leave the reservations without permission (History.com, 2019). At one point in Browning, there was a fence around the town and residents needed a written permit to leave (G. Klauk, personal communication, March 20, 2021). Despite the efforts by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the umbrella governing body for reservations that depends on federal money, the conditions on reservations are comparable to third world countries (History.com, 2019).

An individual's self-efficacy may be high, aided perhaps by the training and guidance of the local schools, but larger social structures may prevent the benefits of seeking employment to outweigh the costs for the individual. In the context of the Health Belief Model, community for Browning is perhaps the biggest protective factor against the many health issues residents face, and yet community does not always protect against unemployment. To find employment and purpose, youth must generally leave the community and look for work in surrounding counties, thus abandoning the main protective factor in their lives. For locals to leave Browning in search of work, means they are leaving their families, native culture, and all major support networks. The severity of the unemployment problem may not outweigh the risk of leaving their culture.

The goal of the horse training prevention program would be to bring work to the community, rather than luring ambitious youth away from fortifying their own local economy. Klauk (personal communication, March 20, 2021) states that keeping money in the community

and starting new businesses in Browning would be the most effective way to tackle the unemployment problem.

Evidenced-Based Program

The goal of a prevention program for the youth in Browning is to bring jobs to the community. Rather than providing training or incentives for youth to change their lives by leaving the community in search of work, the most effective evidence-based program for reducing unemployment in the population of Native American youth, would be one that bolsters the local economy. Partnering the non-profit Freedom Horse Farm with Blackfoot youth and local schools could help accomplish this goal.

One evidence-based program, the Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project, provides government subsidies for individuals who have started work and left the unemployment program. Through randomized controlled trials, studies show employment rates rising and poverty and welfare dependency dropping (Social Programs that Work, 2018). Similarly, the Minnesota Family Investment Program shows the effectiveness of paying supplements for the earnings of former welfare recipients who find work (Social Programs that Work, 2018). However, Edwards (2012) believes that any subsidies create a reliance on the government, and what is needed to bolster the employment health on reservations is more self-determination and greater Indian control over their lands and resources. There historically have been federal subsidies granted to the tribes in the form of treaties, but the distribution of funds is poorly managed and the payments have been phasing out (G. Klauk, personal communication March 20, 2021).

A current program on the Blackfoot Reservation that fosters self-determination, is a project to rebuild herds of bison. In the mid-19th century, white people were killing herds to extinction in the same era they were forcing natives onto reservations. The bison program aims to reclaim an icon and source of pride for the Blackfoot culture and is currently slowly building stock numbers. The tribe holds an annual buffalo drive and encourages youth on horseback to become involved (Montana PBS, 2019). The buffalo drive event involves camping as a community in tipis and engaging in singing in the native language and storytelling. The drive reconnects participants to the native language, the buffalo, the land, and their sense of purpose. However, as of April 2021, Montana now passed House Bills 302 and 318 which will end the program of bison being reintroduced on public lands. The governor cites the needs of farmers, ranchers, and private property owners as the reasons for restricting tribal use of rangelands (Weber, 2021). Ervin Carlson from Blackfeet Nation, president of the InterTribal Buffalo Council says, “It’s kind of an attack on tribal sovereignty” (Nicholas, 2021)

Another potentially effective program building off cultural norms to fortify purpose and self-efficacy, that would be disconnected from federal regulation, is the Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth program. Freedom Horse Farm is an organization in Kalispell, Montana with the mission to adopt, train, and resale mustangs. The wild horse populations in the western United States have exceeded carrying capacity and are destroying native rangelands. Horse slaughter is illegal in the US, so in a culling effort the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has rounded up over 80,000 horses. They are currently keeping the horses in holding pens and paying individuals \$1,500 per horse to adopt them. The Blackfoot culture has a long history of connection with horses. In Browning, horses are often the prize possession of families, and native entertainment and competition revolve around horses (G. Klauk, personal communication, March 20, 2021). In

addition to earning a wage through the organization, the school district is willing to grant school credit to students who participate in training horses for Freedom Horse Farm. This program would bring purpose to the young people's lives and would bring a new business to the local economy.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

A specific population that may be affected by lack of purpose and future unemployment in the community of Browning, Montana, is the youth who have not finished high school. The Town Chart's Montana Education report compiles data from the 2020 American Community Survey census and a survey from Common Core Data. For youth in Browning from the ages of 18 to 24 years, 40% do not have a high school diploma (Town Charts, 2020). Career Outlooks (2015) reports from the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistic's Current Population Survey, that high school graduates are more than twice as likely to find employment in the first three years of job search as youth without diplomas.

The unique impact on finding purpose and future employment for the 40% of young adults in Browning who have not graduated high school, is not only the lack of a diploma for employment qualification purposes but the indication of a lack of interest for this population in pursuing work. Family support and involvement play a huge role in an individual's decision to graduate high school or not. By dropping out, youth are perpetuating the cycle of deprioritizing

work. When school becomes voluntary, the youth make the conscious choice to engage in the work or not, and to opt-out does not bode well for the prospects of seeking work in an already challenging employment climate in this isolated, marginalized community.

One mechanism that would increase cultural connection and likelihood for success in a prevention program, would be to partner with the alternative high school. The school was opened in 2010 in response to the need for alternative services for the large population of high school dropouts (G. Klauk, personal communication, March 20, 2021). The philosophy of the alternative school differs in that mental health and wellness are prioritized. Teachers and counselors have a presence in the community, making home visits to invite dropouts to enroll in their school. The emphasis is on choice and autonomy for students enrolled, and teachers practice non-punitive disciplinary action (G. Klauk, personal communication, March 20, 2021).

A second mechanism to increase the success of the program would be to partner with the regular Browning schools and the community college to find youth best fit for the training jobs, and to network for grant money to help sustain the program. While horses are a historical and contemporary cultural component for the Blackfeet, certainly not all residents of Browning have interest or skill in horse training. The target population would need to be youth with a specific interest in horses. Networking with the educational institutions would provide the initial opportunity to find and collaborate with youth most interested in the project. Further, networking with the college may provide support for the project by collaborating on grants and accessing funding available for health initiatives on reservations.

Ethical considerations in prevention programming for this community, include empowering voluntary consent for participation and advocating for social change that truly helps the local population. Hage & Romano (2013) state in relation to informed consent, “procedures

to ensure the dignity and autonomy in respect to decisions about participation are paramount” (p.40). Youth in Browning may have little to no interest in working, and while having a purpose and pursuing a career may have proven mental health benefits, it is vital that values about improving quality of life are not imposed on members of the community. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) counselors should advocate for social changes that, “improve the quality of life for individuals and groups and remove potential barriers to the provision or access of appropriate services being offered” (p.8). According to ethical code A.1.a., “the primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients” (American Counseling Association, 2014, p.4). In the development of the Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth program, stakeholder collaboration is critical to ensure that the program promotes the dignity and welfare of the client and improves the quality of life for youth on the reservation within their very specific cultural context.

Through the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior, elicitation research would be warranted for the project to see if there is interest in such a program with horses and to construct the intervention according specifically to those who will participate in it (Hage & Romano, 2013). Attitudes towards employment in Browning youth could be assessed to gain a prediction of behavior change and participation in the program (Hage & Romano, 2013). A survey could be sent out to high school students with questions about interests in careers, work, and horses, and a focus group with teachers, counselors, and school board members could be set up to gather data about attitudes and needs.

PART 5: ADVOCACY

Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth

Residents of Browning face barriers to developing meaningful careers and purpose on institutional, community, and public policy levels. Advocacy action could be taken on each of these levels through the Horse Training Jobs for Native Youth program by connecting individuals with a supportive institution, exploring how community norms may hinder their growth, and examining how policy blocks development. The general outlook of the program on the individual level will embody a strengths-based approach where empowerment interventions will be used with the marginalized native clients (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015).

At the institutional level, the barriers to meaningful employment that natives in Browning face, are lack of infrastructure and a thriving economy. Because there are very few local businesses and few jobs, the options for local employment are scarce. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015) recommend connecting, “marginalized clients with supportive individuals within social institutions (e.g., schools, businesses, church, etc.) who are able to help alter inequities.” Freedom Horse Farm, Inc. (with whom the author is president/director) adopts mustangs, trains them, and rehomes them or uses them for equine-assisted psychotherapy. Directors of this organization could adopt wild horses from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) auctions, transport them to Browning for native youth to work with, then pick the horses up and find appropriate homes when they are trained. The organization could use the horse adoption money that is granted by the BLM, the funds made in selling the

horses, as well as seek grant money and additional outside support for the program, to pay the native youth.

At the community level, values and regulations embedded in society may hinder the growth and development of meaningful employment for native youth. An effective advocacy action would be exploring with native youth how employment norms affect their career outlook. Elicitation research, or a needs assessment, would need to be undertaken for the project to gain information on native youths' outlook on working in the program. This could be done in the form of surveys sent out to students, informal interviewing, or focus groups with interested youth and stakeholders. Networking with a community organization called Manpower would be important, whose mission is to, "increase occupational skill attainment, improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, enhance the productivity of the Blackfeet Nation's economy" (Blackfeet Manpower, 2014).

On the public policy level, barriers have existed historically for natives throughout all of US history. Treaties were notoriously heavily biased against natives and not upheld. The advocacy action on this level would be to, "conduct research to examine how local, state, and federal laws and policies contribute to or hinder the growth and development of privileged and marginalized clients" (The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015). The original policy, or treaty, with the Blackfeet stated that "white men" may live on, travel through, build any infrastructure and use any resources on the Blackfoot reservation, but "Indians" consent to remain on the reservation (Washington State Historical Society, 2021). Further, government policy took control of all finances of the natives and held their funds in trust; Blackfoot residents were required to write the government in order to gain access to withdraws on their money (G. Klauk, personal communication, 4/13/2021). Contemporarily,

money appropriated for reservations is waning as fewer people fulfill the blood quantum, which requires natives to be a certain percentage of Blackfoot blood to receive payments (Klauk, personal communication, 4/13/2021). Clearly, US policy has hindered economic growth in this marginalized community.

Throughout US history, Native Americans have been marginalized and their potential for meaningful career development suppressed by federal policy and other risk factors. A prevention program for native youth in line with local cultural norms may be beneficial in providing opportunity for purposeful work to avoid lifelong unemployment and dependency on subsidies. In developing purpose and self-determination in an occupation, individuals may experience improved mental health and life fulfillment.

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